

PreventionAlert

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25% of U.S. Children Are Exposed to Household Alcohol Abuse

A new education kit geared towards treatment staff, community groups, and schools has just been released to deal with the pervasive problem of the influence of substance abuse by parents on their children. To “break the cycle of addiction,” according to SAMHSA Administrator Charles Curie, the *Children’s Program Kit, Supportive Education for Children of Addicted Parents* will be published in May 2003. It can be ordered free of charge by calling the substance abuse clearinghouse hot line 1-800-729-6686, accessed electronically or ordered at www.ncadi.samhsa.gov.

The scope of the problem

More than 28 million Americans are children of alcoholics; nearly 11 million are under the age of 18. According to Administrator Curie, this means that one in four U.S. children are exposed to alcohol abuse or alcohol dependence in the family household. Add to this the number of parents addicted to illicit drugs, and the problem is a staggering one.

This is the case because alcoholism and drug addiction tend to run in families. If a child’s parent is a habitual drinker, the chances that he will be one, too, are two to nine times greater than a child without an alcoholic parent. The trend is especially strong for males—sons of alcoholic fathers are at least four times more likely to duplicate that behavior than the offspring of nonalcoholic fathers. The trends are similar for drug addicts and their children.

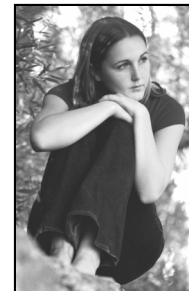
The mental health and behavioral fallout

There is a strong relationship, as well, between parental addiction and child abuse. Almost three-quarters of child welfare professionals cite abuse of illicit drugs and/or alcohol as the top cause for the dramatic rise in child maltreatment since 1986. Most welfare professionals (80 percent) report that substance abuse causes or contributes to at least half of all child abuse. Alcohol is specifically associated with physical abuse; cocaine with sexual abuse.

Children exposed prenatally to illicit drugs are two to three times more likely to be abused or neglected. One study has shown that a majority of runaways and homeless youth reported problem drinking or drug use in the home. Of nearly 12,000 infants abandoned at birth in hospitals or

elsewhere, 78 percent had been exposed in utero to drugs. The cost to care for each abandoned infant is \$460 per day.

Children of parents addicted to drugs and/or alcohol suffer more from depression, anxiety, and psychiatric and psychosocial dysfunction. More than 50 percent of children hospitalized for psychiatric disorders have one or more addicted parent.



Children of parents addicted to drugs and/or alcohol have elevated rates of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) or oppositional defiant disorder (ODD). Such children are more likely to lack empathy for other persons, feel socially inadequate, have low self-esteem, and lack control over their environment. Children of addicted parents score lower on many school achievement tests, particularly math.

In one study, 41 percent of parents addicted to substances reported that at least one of their children repeated a grade in school, 19 percent were truants, and 30 percent had been suspended from school.

Help is here

Children of addicted parents often achieve increased resilience when supported by caring adults. A nonalcoholic parent or stepparent, aunt or uncle, grandparent, teacher or other role model can step in and do wonders for such children. Such children who have supportive adults have increased autonomy and independence, stronger social skills, better ability to cope with difficult emotional experiences, and better day-to-day coping strategies.

The *Children’s Program Kit: Supportive Education for Children of Addicted Parents* contains complete inservice training on this issue for substance abuse treatment and counseling staff, as well as school personnel and community leaders. There are strategies and tools for therapists to use with their clients who may be both parents and children. There is a detailed curriculum with five separate activities for elementary, middle school, and high school youth, or 15 activities in all. Some of the activities are called “Addiction Illustrated,” “Bubblegum Family,” and “Feelings Box.” Sample letters to addicted parents appealing to them to support their children’s participation in the program are provided. The *Kit* also contains new videos, posters, fliers, and evaluation forms.

Source: *Children’s Program Kit, Supportive Education for Children of Addicted Parents*, SAMHSA 2003.

To change recipient’s name or fax number or to order a catalog of substance abuse publications, call SAMHSA’s National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information (NCADI) at 1-800-729-6686, TDD 1-800-487-4889 (for the hearing impaired). See www.health.org/govpubs/prealert for previous Prevention Alerts online.



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